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MELANIE LAGOUTTE

Sunny Duval wanted to keep it simple on Amour d'amour. "A song can be so catchy that you don't realize that it's all planned out," says the former Les Breastfeeders guitarist. "The trick is to make it sound not planned."

For Sunny Duval, amour makes the world go 'round

Quebec rock guitarist celebrates life, love and his Louisiana heroes on third solo album

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
MUSIC

Sunny Duval's third solo album, Amour d'amour, is a celebration of life that's, well, Sunny side up and blooming in the light of Louisiana music. What's not to celebrate when the former lead guitarist of Les Breastfeeders has singer and multi-instrumentalist (and wife) Mara Tremblay by his side?

"The album is all about love, because this world truly needs love," Duval said on a recent brilliant fall day. "Love is the only thing that's perfectly free, recyclable and universal. You can give as much as you want and still have some left."

There's a romantic notion of two creative people living under one roof. "Well, we always sing something stupid about the dog — there's a lot of that at home. I've just finished the album, so I shut down my creative side a bit. She's just about to start seriously writing songs for her next album, so the creative atmosphere will be back in the house.

"On weekends, if I don't have a band or DJ gig, sometimes I'll play on one of her gigs. Last year I took a course in sound engineering, so I can do her sound when she's playing. Of course, she's everywhere on my album — plays guitar, fiddle, piano, sings.

"Obviously Amour d'amour was inspired by her. But they're not love songs like you hear on pop radio in Quebec — that stuff I find very boring. The atmosphere is easygoing — I've never been with someone so easy to live with."

Duval seems to have been born with rock 'n' roll and rhythm-and-blues traditions in his bones — rare for someone his age (40, looks younger). He's very fussy about his roots.

"My previous album was mostly rock 'n' roll and doo-wop and a bit of country, but this one is based on rhythm-and-blues and soul from the '50s and '60s from New Orleans, like my heroes Professor Longhair, Allen Toussaint and Dr. John."

He authentically pronounces the name of the city that gave birth to jazz (in the 1910s) and the roots of rock 'n' roll (in the late '40s and early '50s) as "Noo Awlins." But, he adds, "obviously, I live here. I'm white and I sing in French, so it can't be a slavish imitation. I keep the rock 'n' roll energy and the love of celebrating."

Duval has been to New Orleans six times in the past three years and — along with Lafayette (Cajun country) two hours away — considers it his second home.

"People are in great spirits even if they've gone through bad times. The Mardi Gras Indians say it best: 'Won't bow down, don't know how.' They're always ready to party, even as they're still rebuilding their homes after Katrina.

"I had three girl singers who were not Cajun and didn't speak French, but I made them sing it anyway, sort of like Serge Gainsbourg on his reggae album — the accent adds a little something.

"A couple of critics complained that the lyrics were too simple, whatever. I don't have a whole lot of things to say in one song — I just want to keep it to around three minutes. A song can be so catchy that you don't realize that it's all planned out. The trick is to make it sound not planned. It's a whole art in itself." (Good enough, critics?)

Duval says his parents didn't listen to music, but his uncle played Beatles vinyl. "I'd look at the covers and that triggered my love for rock. Then MuchMusic and MusiquePlus opened and I moved onto hair metal during the '80s, and that took me to blues riffs. I was always fascinated by the blues, and this project got me back to funk roots.

"As I'm not yet on tour with the album, I DJ a lot — it's a good way to listen to music and drink for free!"

As a DJ, he plays '60s and '70s country music, rock 'n' roll, rhythm and blues, soul music, punk, discs from the '80s and '90s.

"When you're in a bar, you don't want to hear what's popular at the moment because you can hear it everywhere else. If someone asks for Duran Duran, I'll play it. If they ask for Arcade Fire, I won't, because I just don't like it. But I always make a point of playing two Ramones songs, back to back. It needs to be done!"

This month, Duval and Tremblay are off to Louisiana for the Blackpot Festival, a two-day cookoff with bands from all over the U.S. playing roots music.

"I've never felt better about myself," Duval proclaims. "People say 40 is the turning point. I don't know, because I never had a regular job — I was always a lazy ass. I've always liked to do things that keep me happy."

Amour d'amour is available now.

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THEATRE REVIEW

Too much room to frolic in Chekhov's Cherry Orchard

Great play deserves better than this

PAT DONNELLY
GAZETTE THEATRE CRITIC

When the going gets tough, not everyone gets going. Some people, brought up to ignore economic realities, lack basic survival mechanisms. They retreat into denial, spending as if they still have money, carrying on pretty much as they always have — until things get much worse.

Anton Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, now playing at Théâtre du Rideau Vert, in French as La Cerisaie, tells the story of a once-wealthy family that's about to lose its ancestral home.

When the play was first produced, in 1904, at the Moscow Art Theatre, Russia was on the verge of a revolution and Chekhov was months away from dying of tuberculosis. While it is burdened with a strong sense of doom, the play also reveals the writer's wry sense of humour.

The TRV production, directed by Moscow-trained Alexandre Marine, emphasizes the humour in an extreme, clown-esque style that ignores the psychological depth and delicate nuances of Chekhov's observations about humanity — the very things that make his plays relevant to succeeding generations.

That Canada's oldest professional theatre, which teetered on the brink of bankruptcy not so very long ago, should kick off its 65th anniversary season with such a frivolous version of this profound classic about frivolous people sinking into debt seems both appropriate and unfortunate.

Marine never merely directs — he adapts, always striving to make his own radical artistic statement, using the text as a springboard to carefully choreographed theatrical action.

Sometimes his style works, sometimes it doesn't, depending on whether the actors prove capable of rising to the challenge.

In the role of Lioubov, the woman who has returned from Paris to the abode of her childhood with a near-empty purse, Sylvie Drapeau is charming, deluded, regal, always thoughtful beneath the surface. She lends an air of dignity to the most ridiculous poses and outlandish costumes. (The bouquet of roses dress and matching turban she wears during the final scene isn't just wildly inappropriate for train travel, it's bizarre.)

Jean Marchand, too, as Lioubov's ineffectual brother, Leonid, commands attention with a strong presence and well-considered words.

Marc Béland gives us a spoofy, lightweight version of the wealthy former peasant Lopakhine, who is destined to purchase the estate. As the elderly manservant Firs, Igor Ovadis hits a good balance between shtick (his rattling teacups trick is clever) and melancholy.

Paul Ahmarani adapts all too well to Marine's style, creating a cartoonish Epikhodov, the humble man in love with the flirtatious maid Douniacha, played too cute and sassy by Catherine de Léan.

As Marine skates along the surface of La Cerisaie, there are occasional moments of startling innovation (such as the graphic demise of the aristocracy at the end) that almost seem to justify the exercise.

His set of blazing white cherry blossoms, although it often proves awkward in its division of the stage, certainly emphasizes the tree-hugger side of Chekhov. His use of a giant red ball that keeps getting tossed around (an overblown cherry? A symbol of communism?) was baffling but visually arresting, a playful distraction from the essence of a great play that deserves better than this.

La Cerisaie, by Anton Chekhov, directed by Alexandre Marine, continues until Oct. 19 at Théâtre du Rideau Vert, 4664 St-Denis St. Call 514-844-1793 or visit rideauvert.qc.ca.

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